

# Taxpayers' money spent to boost Barroso's profile as Commission president

**Journalists' expenses will be paid if they accompany the European Commission president on foreign trips, in a new public relations drive which will cost taxpayers hundreds of thousands of euros.**



European Commission president Jose Manuel Barroso Photo: BLOOMBERG

By Nick Meo and Martin Banks in Brussels

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Jose Manuel Barroso, the former Portuguese prime minister, will also have a photographer and television producer available 24 hours a day, as well as the services of a team of four speechwriters to call on at all times, under the new strategy to boost his media and political profile.

The new measures to "personalise" his image were revealed in a leaked letter written by Viviane Reding, the Justice Commissioner, who is in charge of [EU](#) communications.

They have been drawn up as Mr Barroso engages in a three-way power struggle with EU president [Herman Van Rompuy](#), and [Catherine Ashton](#), the head of the new European diplomatic service, both of whom were appointed last year.

The EU has already come under fire for spending more than €8 million euros on entertaining, "training" and "informing" individual journalists last year, and devoted particular attention to those from Ireland in the run up to that country's referendum on the Lisbon Treaty.

Now Mrs Reding is proposing to focus on boosting Mr Barroso's standing in what she described in her letter as "the first but certainly not the last step towards improving the communications efforts of the Commission."

The package of measures include a team of eight staff to update his website, monitoring and rebuttal of blogs criticising the EU, rapid verbatim transcripts of all the Commission president's public remarks - and, from next month, a plan to pay the costs of reporters travelling with Mr Barroso or other commissioners to "important meetings abroad".

But it has come under fire from critics. "Spending money on improving Barroso's image is the latest in a long line of EU vanity projects funded by the taxpayer," said Siân Herbert, a researcher with Open Europe, the Eurosceptic think tank.

"Instead of paying for photos and videos of an unelected Commission President, the EU could radically improve its image by actually starting to listen to citizens and stopping wasting their money."

The move by the Commission reflects frustration that much of its work is little reported and most of its leading figures are unknown to the wider European public.

Mr Barroso is regarded as coming out ahead of his rivals after arranging a grandiose "State of the Union" address in Strasbourg on Tuesday, in which he will outline his vision for the year ahead in front of 736 assembled MEPs.

The speech, held this year for the first time and modelled on the one given annually by the President of the United States, has been billed by Mr Barroso's supporters as a grand platform for sketching out the way ahead for the EU, as the US President does for America.

There will be one significant difference, however, from the grand event before Congress in Washington: MEPs will be "fined" if they do not sit through the entire three hour session.

Leaders of the European Parliament's main parties have decided to cut daily allowances if MEPs are not present for at least two out of three votes held during the session.

The proposal caused incredulity among MEPs.

Liberal Democrat MEP Baroness Sarah Ludford told *The Sunday Telegraph*: "This is absurd. We are supposed to be a democratic parliament, one in which MEPs are inspired to attend a debate through its intrinsic interest and relevance.

"To enforce attendance through the use of disciplinary measures is reminiscent of Stalinist and Maoist stage-management at its worst."

Under the proposals MEPs will be "fined" about €60 in food and hotel allowances if they do not sit through the entire speech, and the debate that follows.

The speech, introduced in the wake of the Lisbon Treaty's adoption last year, comes at a difficult time for the EU. The euro has had a crisis year, governments are under financial strain across a Europe ravaged by recession, and polls show that the EU has rarely been so unpopular with Europeans.

But despite all that, the pressure is on President Barroso, a competent if unimpressive politician, to deliver an inspirational speech.

His team hope the new media strategy will help to transform his image at a time when [his prominence at Brussels is threatened by both Mr Von Rompuy and Lady Ashton](#).

Outside his native Portugal, Mr Barroso has made little impact during his six year career at the heart of the EU establishment, where he has been Commission president since 2004. He was a youthful Maoist before joining a Right-wing Portuguese party, rising to be prime minister.

His office in Brussels did not give any clue about what he will say next week. But, as jockeying begins for a series of battles over multi-billion euro budgets, he is expected to outline a review of the EU's spending for several years ahead, as well as proposing reforms to make Europe more competitive, and addressing climate change.

Paul Adamson, publisher of ESharp magazine which covers the EU, said: "There's no doubt Barroso and Van Rompuy are in a power struggle. Both are fighting for the prime spot and to set the agenda, along with EU High Representative Catherine Ashton, who also wants a share of the limelight.

"It still isn't clear who is the more important of the two presidents but Barroso has the advantage of a huge administration behind him while Van Rompuy is more under-resourced."

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